

The Priest and the Lily

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Good God. When I consider the melancholy fate of so many of botany's votaries, I am tempted to ask whether men are in their right mind who so desperately risk life and everything else through the love of collecting plants.

Carl Linnaeus

1.

A small flock of purple doves was clustered in an apricot tree, the first peach and cream blossoms beginning to unfurl along its crooked branches. Against the molten butter of the rising sun it was like a delicate Chinese painting. Joseph did not look behind him: he knew dogs with sharpened ribcages would be licking the stones; nor to his right, in case he saw the silent mill and the putrid river; nor down at the streets save he caught sight of an opium addict, half frozen and silently delirious. He wanted to leave this god-forsaken town with this final and beautiful image intact, a sign that God was everywhere and that none, not even here, had been deserted.

Beyond the town, hanging over and caging them in, were battlements and turrets, the ruins of the last Great Wall of China. Past that barrier was freedom; the wide open steppes he longed for, the pure fresh air he had dreamt of. There were soldiers, border guards, by the wall, but they were sleeping. Joseph nervously angled his mule as far away from them as possible. As he passed by, his mule slipped on the rough cobbles, its hoof scraping loudly against the stone.

Joseph held his breath and looked round. One of the soldiers opened his eyes. He sprang to his feet with a cry, waking his companion. The second soldier snapped his head back and stared unfocusedly about him and then staggered upright, twisting his rifle round towards them. The three of them came to a ragged halt. The first soldier was still shouting. The second advanced upon them, blocking their path and aiming the bayonet at the end of his rifle at Tsem. They were both Chinese, dressed in dark blue uniforms that were fraying and unravelling at the hems with tears at the elbows. Their rifles were dark with rust. It was impossible to tell how old they were, their faces were so smooth, their eyes hidden in shadow beneath their caps. They could be but boys, thought Joseph, boys with lethal weapons. Mendo and Tsem now slid from their mules and Joseph did likewise. The first soldier seemed to be gesturing towards something, barking orders at them in a harsh, guttural language. Mendo started tying up the mules to the broken remnants of the gate.

What's happening? whispered Joseph.

He wants to see what we're carrying.

Surely they can see we're not the type to transport opium. Tsem said something and Mendo translated.

He says, how much we have to bribe them will depend on how valuable our luggage is.

Have you explained to them who we are? asked Joseph, raising his voice a little.

The first soldier now swung his rifle around and dug the butt into Joseph's shoulder, while shouting something at him. He felt his heartbeat rise and a cold sweat break out across his palms and chest. The soldier pointed and shouted again and Joseph stepped back, away from the mules and his companions. Mendo and Tsem finished tying up all the mules and started unloading their packs and lining them up in the gateway. Joseph wiped his clammy hands on his cassock. He tried to take deep breaths to still his racing heart. His shoulder throbbed. What frightened him was the unpredictability and arbitrary nature of their encounter. These men, no, boys, could do anything with impunity and, at this time of the morning, there was not a single person who would witness their actions.

Mendo and Tsem now started to undo the oiled canvas holdalls and peel back the hes-

sian layers wrapped round Joseph's precious equipment. The soldiers, who had been standing threateningly close to the two men, their bayonets at the level of Mendo's and Tsem's stomachs, now bent closer, curiously examining the herbarium paper, Joseph's collection of tools for prising fossils from rock, his taxidermy kit with razor-sharp scalpel blades and waxy thread for sewing skins, discs of beeswax, pots of ink and leather-bound notebooks. One of the soldiers kicked a pile of specimen jars with the toe of his boot and Joseph had to restrain himself from pulling the man away. The first soldier reached forward and pocketed one of the jars and a blade. He strolled over to Tsem who was unpacking their food. He slipped a bundle of dried meat in his jacket pocket and tossed a packet of *tsamba* to his companion.

Then he barked something at Mendo.

Mendo turned to Joseph. He wants to see our paperwork.

Tsem snorted.

Mendo said, He says he wonders if they can even read.

Joseph pulled the bundle of papers from the inside pocket of his cassock and handed them to the soldier.

It was a horrible reminder of when he had first set foot in Peking. He'd been weak from months at sea and still sick. The ground had felt unsteady beneath his feet. The harbour police had demanded to see his papers and had pored over them endlessly, while other officials had made him prise open his luggage, packed in wooden crates, and empty out his belongings. Wood shavings and hessian had littered the docks and a couple of dirty urchins had made off with some of his possessions. One of the customs officials had pocketed a fine bone-handled knife when he thought Joseph wasn't looking and then given him a nasty smile when he saw him watching.

The soldier now peeled off the first couple of sheets, which were in English, and held them up. The papers fluttered in the breeze and the man opened his hand and let them go. They drifted across the desert, reflecting the first rays of the early morning sun.

Joseph felt sick. He had worked for years building up contacts: men who would help him, men who would want him to work for them, men of means and men with the right connections. And once the expedition had been agreed, he had laboured for months to amass the right equipment, to plot his jour-

ney, to secure the necessary permits and permissions, to book his crossing and hire the two men who now stood helplessly in front of him while his precious possessions were scattered across a filthy cobbled street in the shadow of a decaying wall.

The soldier gave a grim smile and let another sheaf of paper blow free, this time the Chinese translation of the English papers he had already released. The sheet below, he crumpled and started to stuff in his mouth, watching their reaction as he slowly ate the document. The second soldier stood alongside him and released the safety catch on his gun. The weapon was so rusty, the catch snapped off suddenly, making them all jump.

Can you do nothing? said Joseph, through gritted teeth.

Mendo's back, which was towards him, was implacable. Tsem started to walk nonchalantly towards the wall. The second soldier swung his rifle round and trained it on him. Tsem held his hands in the air, walking backwards, and said something to the soldier. The man lowered the gun. Tsem leaned against the wall and started to roll a cigarette. The first soldier swallowed and then spat a wad of chewed-up paper against the stones. Tsem handed him a cigarette and lit it for

him. He rolled another. There was almost complete silence apart from the men's breathing and the chink of the mules' bridles as they shook their heads and nuzzled against each other. Somewhere behind them, back in the town, a dog barked. Tsem handed the cigarette to the other soldier and then rolled one for himself. After a couple of puffs, he spoke to the soldier who appeared to be in command.

Joseph slowly took a few steps forwards so that he was standing alongside Mendo. The soldier's dead eyes never left him even as Tsem talked.

He's explaining who you are, said Mendo quietly, and that you're not a threat to them.

Once Tsem had finished talking the soldier dropped the cigarette and ground it beneath his boot. He barked a couple of orders at Tsem.

And now he wants to know how much you will pay them to let you pass.

I should not have to pay anything, said Joseph angrily.

It's the lesser of two evils, my friend, said Mendo simply.

Finally, Tsem told them the figure. It was extortionate.

And he wants one of the mules, said Mendo glumly.

Joseph counted out the money and handed it to Tsem who gave it to the soldier. He passed it to his second-in-command who made a great show of counting it twice. The first soldier took another cigarette from Tsem and then walked over to the mules. He walked in front of the animals a couple of times and then chose one. He pulled the mule out in front of the three of them. But instead of leading the beast away, he half turned and lunged, burying the bayonet in its chest. The mule brayed, an inhumanly loud sound, its lips curled back exposing its pink and black gums. The soldier pulled the bayonet out and then slashed the animal's throat open. Its eyes rolled back until only the whites showed and it fell to its knees, its head lolling at an unnatural angle. The soldier dropped his cigarette in the mule's blood where it sizzled. The two sauntered off, dividing the money unequally between them. The mule, now stretched out at Joseph's feet, struggled to breathe, its breath rasping in its broken windpipe. They stood and listened for what seemed like a long time before the mule stopped breathing. Joseph stepped past the prostrate animal and started

to repack his equipment, hastily moving some of it away from the widening pool of blood. His hands, though, were trembling and he found it difficult to rewrap his specimen jars. They rattled and clinked and slipped between his fingers. Mendo leaned over him and put both his hands on Joseph's shoulders.

Joseph, he said, and Joseph felt himself being firmly but gently pulled to his feet.

Joseph, said Mendo again, leave it. Tsem and I will repack. Take a walk. We'll be with you shortly.

And he steered Joseph towards the wide open expanse of the desert.